

ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME — B

READING I Ez 17:22-24

READING II 2 Cor 5:6-10

GOSPEL Mk 4:26-34

During the exile, Ezekiel's disciples adapted his message to respond to the needs of the despondent community. In this oracle, they announce the restoration of Israel under a king from the Davidic dynasty. The precise manner of restoration is not spelled out.

The crest of the cedar (v. 22) is the house of David. The Lord will restore the Davidic dynasty in the land of Israel where it will prosper. The once rejected dynasty will regain its proper regal stature, offering protection to subject nations ("the shade of its boughs"). God's action of reversal (high/low, green/withered) will not pass unrecognized. The trees of the field will duly acknowledge God's saving intervention. For God, to speak the Word is to fulfill the Word; The promise then, will become a reality.

In the section of Second Corinthians, Paul uses the image of dwelling in the body and being away from the Lord. Paul's opponents maintain that the body merely exiles the soul from God. Paul replies that the period of separation from the Lord is caught up in faith, not sight. Like his opponents, Paul would prefer to share the Lord's presence. However, unlike them, Paul does not limit that experience to merely the soul. He stresses, rather, that the entire person shares in the Lord's presence. Unlike his opponents, where ecstatic flights of the soul are the reality, for Paul, the reality is to fulfill the Lord's will. In the final judgment, Paul and his opponents will have to rest everything on the performance of good or evil, and not on ecstasy.

The parable of the seed growing of itself (vv.26-29) is unique to Mark. Here, the contrast is between the relative inactivity of the farmer, and the certainty of the harvest. This growth cannot be thwarted. Only at harvest time does the farmer reappear. The harvest is viewed as the time of the last judgment. It is likely that the parable was an answer to those who were discouraged over the delayed progress of God's kingdom, as proclaimed by Jesus.

The parable of the mustard seed is an appeal for patience, given the relatively small beginnings of the kingdom. V. 31 emphasizes the smallness of the venture. V. 32 stresses incontestable growth. God can affect such growth even though the initial stages are rather inconspicuous. Eventually, the kingdom will reach such proportions. In the meantime, patience is required.

In vv. 33-34, Mark offers his view of Jesus' parables. Jesus uses parables only when he addresses the crowds. When alone with his disciples, he offers a special explanation. For Mark, therefore, the parables are by their nature obscure, and so their proper understanding calls for a special revelation.

To grow is to acknowledge the giver of gifts. We are programmed to determine progress; We find it hard to let God have a free hand. We are built to measure success; We find it difficult to allow God a different manner of calculation. We are brought up to relate energy expended to results obtained; We find it almost impossible to let God employ another system. Yet to grow is to admit a giver of gifts. To grow is to acknowledge the giver of gifts.

For the exilic community, the debacle following the fall of Jerusalem seemed to preclude hope for the future. At such a time, Ezekiel's disciples preached a message of divine gifts. God himself will intervene and restore the Davidic dynasty. What is low in human estimation will become high in divine gift-giving. What is withered in human calculations will become green in divine gratuitousness. For the school of Ezekiel, to grow is to acknowledge the giver of gifts.

For Jesus, the kingdom does not develop according to the human laws of growth. The kingdom is like the seed growing of itself. Humans must allow God a free hand. The kingdom is like a mustard seed. Humans must make room for God's law of evolution. In both cases, humans are called upon to put aside purely human assessments and accept a theology of gift-giving. For Jesus, to grow is to acknowledge the giver of gifts.

The less talented, who contribute their seemingly small gifts to the community, are in the process of growing. The laity, who bring their apparently small insights to bear on the Church community, promote their own growth. The sick and the dying, who see their condition as the setting for resurrection glory, foster their growth. Women, who seek their rightful place in the Church by respectfully challenging Church leaders, encourage their growth. These and similar people believe that human computations by themselves are inadequate. They endorse the belief that to grow is to acknowledge the giver of gifts.

Eucharist takes seemingly insignificant items, bread and wine, and proclaims the presence of the giver of gifts. Eucharist urges the believing community to reflect that presence by seeking out other ways of achieving results. Eucharist is the effort to surpass human computations by announcing that to grow is to acknowledge the giver of gifts.